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ABSTRACT

Female university student and staff perceptions of rape at the University of Maryland were examined with the aid of an anonymous questionnaire on attitudes and perceptions of rape. A randomly selected sample group included 100 female students and 25 female classified employees. Results showed a 64% return rate was achieved despite many follow-up attempts, and subjects tended either to be enthusiastic or declined to participate. Results showed that 61% of respondents felt the University does not provide enough security, and 15% said they knew someone who was a victim of rape. One-third of the sample believed rape victims are brutally treated by police, and over half felt the penalties against rape are rarely enforced. However, only 5% would not call the police if raped and 1% would not seek medical help. A 6-item bibliography is included. (MJM)

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# FEMALE UNIVERSITY STUDENT AND STAFF PERCEPTIONS OF RAPE

Michele Harway Herman and William E. Sedlacek

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## SUMMARY

100 female students and 25 female classified employees were randomly selected and sent an anonymous questionnaire on their attitudes and perceptions of rape. A 64% return rate was achieved despite many follow-up attempts, and subjects tended either to be enthusiastic or declined to participate. Results showed that 61% of respondents felt the University does not provide enough security, and 15% said they knew someone who was a victim of rape. One-third of the sample believed rape victims are brutally treated by police, and over half felt the penalties against rape are rarely enforced. However, only 5% would not call the police if raped and 1% would not seek medical help.

When queried as to how the University might help rape victims, more self-defense classes were chosen by almost two-thirds of respondents. Over half thought that a Help Center[1] specialist and a special counselor at the Counseling Center would be very helpful. The smallest number of respondents were in favor of a rape crisis center which was subsequently begun at the University of Maryland.

Most women do not think that rape is racially motivated (74%) or that an increase of rape is a breakdown of our sexual mores (93%). Differences among colleges or classified employees generally split along age lines, with undergraduates more concerned about the topic than either staff or graduate students. Until rape is considered in a serious, preventative, and non-paranoid manner, and until all members of the campus community, including males, are provided with information, rape may continue to be one of the most protected, least understood phenomena affecting campus life.

[1]The Help Center is an emergency telephone counseling service on campus.

As the complexity of our culture and the population of our cities increases, so does the incidence of rape and other crimes of violence (the FBI reports an increase of 46% in rape between 1960 and 1967). Yet strangely little is known about the process of rape and even less is known about its effect on the victim. Most of the literature on rape has concerned the legal aspects of crimes of rape, the issue of whether to provide abortion for rape victims and the psychopathology of the rapist (Schwartz, 1968; Hardin, 1968; Cohen, Seghorn and Colman, 1969).

There are a few studies that are closer to the point. Woods (1969) made a distinction between pack rape and rape by a single attacker. The latter, he noted, may best be explained in psychological terms, whereas the former is more amenable to a sociological explanation. He related its occurence in Australia to population increase and consequent social disorganization. The availability of open land and motor cars to youths age 16-20 facilitates the commission of the crime.

Amir (1970) in a group of case studies of rape discussed demographic patterns of rapists and rape victims. He suggested a subculture theory of violence as an explanatory mechanism for the pattern of rape revealed in his investigations.

Sutherland and Scherl (1970) interviewed rape victims shortly after the assault. Clear patterns of emotional response were discerned among these women, including acute distress (phase 1), denial of the impact of the assault (phase 2) and depression and the need to talk (phase 3).

Universities and colleges are felt by mary to be likely locations for a rapid increase in rape cases. Many young women come and go and campuses are often isolated and have not developed elaborate security measures. At the

University of Maryland there have been several reported rapes in the recent past. This has created a great amount of anxiety among the female population on campus. As a result, escort services and self-defense classes have been initiated. Even though there are few studies of rape victims, there are even fewer studies that explore the fears of "potential" victims (that is, any woman) and the amount of information about rape and self-defense that such women possess.

## Method

100 female students (25 from each of four colleges: Arts and Sciences, Business and Public Administration, Education and Graduate ) were randomly selected from the University telephone directory. In addition, a group of 25 female classified employees was also randomly chosen from the University directory. Each received a short questionnaire with a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study. In addition each received a post card with her name on it. The subjects were instructed to return the card at the time they returned the questionnaire. The purpose of this was to preserve anonymity (since no name appeared on the questionnaires) but to allow the researcher to monitor returns. A second mailing of the questionnaire was sent two weeks after the first mailing, and a telephone followup was conducted a few weeks later.

## Results and Discussion

In spite of repeated attempts to contact nonrespondents only a 64% response rate was attained. In addition, an unusually high rate of refusals to participate was observed (8%). It is suggested that the same sensitivity and fear which makes discussion of rape a taboo topic and prevents rape victims from seeking help inhibited a large number of questionnaire recipients, in spite of the anonymity provided by the postcard method. On the other hand, among those who did respond, there was a very rapid return rate with almost 50% of the recipients

returning their questionnaire without any followup. Many respondents also wrote that they were very pleased to be queried on this topic. This testifies to the awakening interest at the University in seeking solutions to the rape problem and a willingness on the part of many women to put aside their fear and divulge their feelings on the topic. In sum, University of Maryland community members are quite polarized on voicing their opinions on this sensitive topic. Data which follow must be interpreted in this light.

Although most respondents were living off campus (only 29% were on-campus residents), most disagreed with a statement claiming no fear of walking in College Park at night, and a majority (61%) felt that the University does not provide enough security. A total of 15% of the respondents stated that they knew someone who had been the victim of a rape. Although this number on the surface appears small, it suggests that many more women have been raped than has heretofore been believed. Although the popular literature abounds with stories of rape victims not informing the police, these data suggest that the number of unreported rapes might be very large indeed. In substantiation of this point of view, almost one-third of the sample believed that rape victims are brutually treated by law enforcement officers, and over half the respondents felt that penalties against rape are rarely enforced. In spite of this, 5% would not call the police if raped, and 1% would not seek medical help. Over one-third, however, would seek psychiatric or psychological help.

When queried as to how the University might help rape victims, more self-defense classes were chosen by almost two-thirds of respondents. Over half thought that a Help Center[1] specialist and a special counselor at the Counseling Center would be very helpful. The smallest number of respondents were in favor of a rape crisis center which was subsequently begun at the University of Maryland.

There have been many beliefs about rape bandied about. Some have an empirical or theoretical base. Others are popular "knowledge." Respondents in this study

[1]The Help Center is an emergency telephone counseling service on campus.

agree with one popular belief about rape, with over half of the respondents believing that penalties against rape are rarely enforced (53%) but many also feel that gang rape and single rape stem from different sources (51%). This latter result agrees with Wood's (1969) findings. Most women do not think that rape is racially motivated (74%) or that an increase of rapes is a result of the breakdown of our sexual mores (93%).

After this overall look at the data was completed, responses of subjects within different categories were compared one to another by means of F-tests. All differences noted below were significant at the .05 level. There were few differences between resident students and commuting students, although residents more often felt that the University did not provide enough security. Commuters, however, would more often seek psychological treatment if raped than would residents.

When the data were examined in the light of College of enrollment (or staff affiliation), more differences resulted. Most of the differences, however, tended to be age-related, with undergraduates answering items significantly differently than graduate students and staff. For instance, students in Business and Public Administration were more often afraid of walking on campus than were staff members. Students in Education felt that the campus lacked security significantly more often than did either graduate students or staff. Undergraduate students generally felt a greater need for self-defense classes than did staff or graduate students. Graduate students also felt less of a need for a rape crisis center than any other group.

Arts and Sciences students showed different attitudes toward rape compared to others as they: Agreed more that gang rape and single rape stem from separate sources, and were less apt to feel that women often fantasize being raped.

In summary, it appears that one is dealing with a complex of women in a campus setting. Age, education, marital status, information about rape, attitudes toward rape, and the inclination to contemplate the consequences of rape are but a few of the dimensions that show variability among female members of the campus community. Suggestions such as self-defense classes, courses and programs on rape information, counselor, staff, and police training programs, a rape crisis center, increased security such as escort services, better campus patrols, better lighting, and bus services all appear to be practical and worthwhile steps for any institution to take. Probably no single change will have much effect on the problem of campus rapes. Until rape is considered in a serious, preventative, and non-paranoid manner, and until all members of the campus community, including males, are provided with information, rape may continue to be one of the most protected, least understood phenomena affecting campus life.

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